

Life as a beauty queen

BY JENNIFER WIG
Special to The Times

It was the weekend of the Miss Illinois USA pageant. It also was the weekend of her best friend's wedding.

Amanda Reynolds had a choice to make: to be a bridesmaid or to be a beauty queen.

Reynolds didn't want to be selfish. And she had been to the competition twice before and returned home empty handed.

"I felt like I had a lot on the line," said the 23-year-old Marion resident. "I didn't want to let her down."

Her best friend insisted she compete.

But the third time was the charm as Reynolds headed to Chicago on Nov. 18 for her final attempt at the Miss Illinois USA crown.

"You almost have that feeling that you couldn't breathe," Reynolds said about winning.

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2002 MISS USA PAGEANT

IN LIFESTYLES

■ REGION ROYALTY: Long before Miss USA came to Gary, queens have reigned at local festivals. E1

MISS ILLINOIS USA Amanda Reynolds walks through a barricade of clothes hanging in her closet at her Marion home.



RONDA YEAGER / DAILY EGYPTIAN

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For Reynolds, pageants are a way of experiencing life.

"Since age 16, Reynolds has competed in both the Miss America and Miss USA circuits.

Last year, Reynolds was first runner-up for Miss Illinois America, winning about \$9,000 and a four-year scholarship. Her two previous appearances at Miss Illinois USA landed her a second runner-up position and then a fourth.

"You learn how to accept defeat," she said. "You learn how to manipulate yourself to prepare for any situation. It's knowing what you want. It drives you to cherish it even more when you do get it. If things were easy, and it was just handed to you, you don't appreciate it."

Now Reynolds will enter the national spotlight, hoping to be crowned Miss USA on March 1 at the Genesis Convention Center in Gary.

Knowing what she wants

Reynolds' bedroom, untouched since high school, is a testament of her drive to success; six diamond crowns line the dresser, trophies fill half the floor, sashes hang everywhere possible, and pageant clothes are squeezed into every rack.

Much of her wardrobe and several pairs of shoes pepper the living room as she packed last week for the drive to Gary.

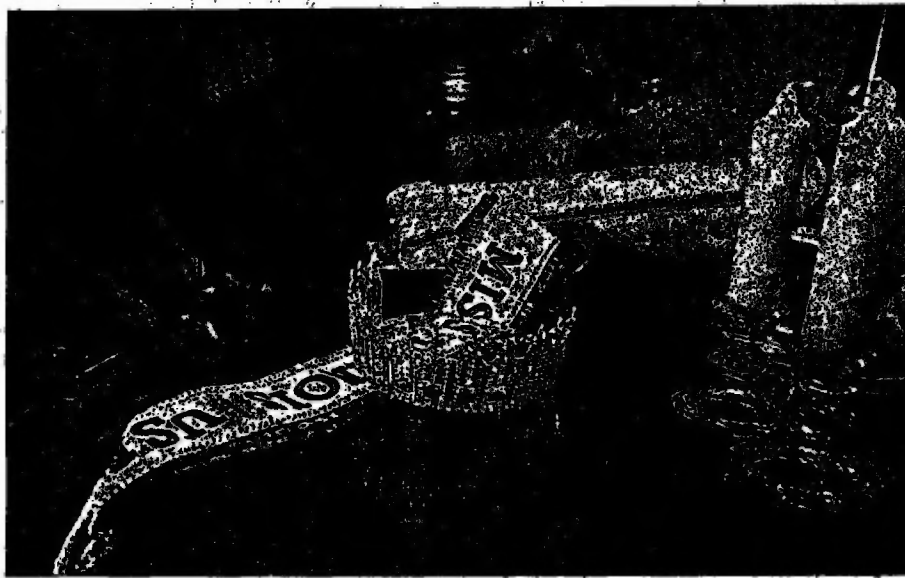
Despite her poise and preparedness for the next event, Reynolds' single concern lies in her occasional klutz attack.

She's beauty and she's grace, but she has the occasional problem of falling off the stage after she is crowned.

Reynolds laughs when she thinks about the three or four laps of skill while gliding down her own victory lane. She's never hurt herself, but she recalls one articular incident in which the crowd took a huge intake of breath.

"I got back up, and it was like a Mentos commercial," she said. "I gave them the thumbs up, and it was OK ... a moment

Getting to know Miss Illinois



REYNOLDS GETS READY at her Marion home for her trip to Gary for the Miss USA pageant. She won the Miss Illinois crown and sash at the last pageant she competed in, which took place in Chicago.

frozen in time."

A reason for thanks

Despite the stereotypes about pageants and the women who compete, the pageants have given Reynolds more to be thankful for than the \$60,000 in cash and prizes she has won.

She and her mother, Sue Castellano, have shared years together through the pageants. Castellano has multiple sclerosis, and although she has been in remission for 10 years, Reynolds said the occasional attack reminds her just how precious time can be.

"When you're threatened

with a life, threatened with an illness, you cherish the moments you spend together," Reynolds said. "(The attacks) are times that are really hard, but we have such a tight bond that we can make it through anything together."

Her mom, a social worker with the Illinois Department of Child and Family Services, also was the inspiration for Reynolds' platform issue - child abuse.

The issue hit home when she was just a fourth-grader, learning a girlfriend was molested by the stepfather. Reynolds now organizes fund-raisers for child abuse programs.

"I felt that a lot of kids didn't have an outlet to tell the abuse they might be receiving," Reynolds said. "Since I'd known about it, it motivated me to get involved in it."

The pageants also helped her with her career choice.

She joined the pageant circuit expecting it to lead to a modeling career. But after volunteering at the Marion Memorial Hospital, she discovered a passion for obstetrics.

Although she has taken a semester off to focus on this pageant, Reynolds studies nursing at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville.

"Part of winning was representing your title and being a positive role model for younger kids and giving back to the community," Reynolds said.

In pursuit of the big title

Reynolds will have an entourage cheering her success in Gary, including her mother, several friends and her coach, Michelle Gesell.

Gesell has known Reynolds since the young woman began competing seven years ago, but was occupied coaching two other women in the Miss USA and Miss Teen USA pageants.

Because of her past success, the Miss USA organizers have hired Gesell to coach Illinois contestants. Now Gesell's interest is personal and professional.

She is confident Reynolds can expect a victory in Gary.

"She is what they're looking for," Gesell said. "She thinks on her feet. She has her own opinion, her own views on things."

Gesell compares it to a job interview. The pageant organizers have a job position to fill: Miss USA.

With or without the title of Miss USA, Marion community members are proud of Reynolds.

People in her hometown have recognized her numerous times, putting up "good luck" signs in their businesses and greeting her with congratulations on her visits to the Southern Illinois town.

George Trammell, executive director of the Greater Marion Area Chamber of Commerce, plans to organize a party celebrating Reynolds' success upon her return. Trammell said Reynolds gives the city national recognition.

"We expect her to win," he said. "Whether she wins or not, she's still reflecting good feeling on Marion and Illinois."

Reynolds finds the attention flattering, but she's also a little embarrassed by it.

"It's not just been a success overnight. I'm glad it's been a process," she said. "You learn a little something about yourself. Through pageantry, I've learned you can't be that fake person."